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LANGUAGE USE DATA MEET CATEGORICAL THEORY

- THE CASE OF WORD ORDER IN DANISH SUBORDINATE CLAUSES

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The accumulation of large corpora of spoken language has made it possible to test a wide range of linguistic hypotheses against authentic data. Generally, the empirical findings will only support the hypotheses to a certain degree. We may also say that language use displays statistical tendencies, but hardly ever categorial distinctions. This poses theoretical problems for the traditional grammatical descriptions, generative as well as functionalist, notwithstanding adjustments along the lines of prototype theory (Lakoff 1987; Langacker 1987).

This paper presents the results of a study of word order in subordinate clauses in contemporary spoken Danish. Modern Danish (as well the other mainland Scandinavian languages Swedish and Norwegian) distinguishes between two different word orders: The so-called *main clause word order* is characterized by the fact that sentence adverbials and negations are placed *after* the finite verb (V2 word order):

han	kommer	ikke	i morgen
he	comes	not	tomorrow

“he doesn’t come tomorrow

In contrast, the so-called *subordinate clause word order* always has the subject of the clause in the first position, and sentence adverbials are placed *between* the subject and the finite verb (V3 word order):

han	sagde	at	han	ikke	kommer	i morgen
he	said	that	he	not	comes	tomorrow

”he said that he won’t come tomorrow”

Under different headings, this has been the subject of numerous theoretically as well as empirically oriented studies. One question regards the traditional connection of word order and syntactic function as main or subordinate clause, another the semantic inconsistency between so-called main clause phenomena (typically, V2 word order) and factivity (Hooper and Thompson 1973; Green 1976; Vikner 1995; Gregersen and Pedersen 2000; Heltoft 2005; Christensen 2007; Heycock 2007; Simons 2007; Wiklund, Bentzen et al. 2009; Bentzen 2010; Heycock 2010).

The results show that V2 word order in subordinate clauses is much more frequent than commonly assumed (Jensen forthc.). Furthermore, they substantiate the hypothesis that V2 word order is associated with foreground or main point of utterance, but notably, only if we accept it as a statistical tendency in language use rather than as an invariant coding. This raises the question of the status of grammatical categories, also addressed in usage-based models such as exemplar theory

(Pierrehumbert 2001; Bybee 2006). We will discuss whether categorical descriptions may be compatible with usage- and exemplar-based theories, and thus may be applied to “fuzzy” data such as these. In continuation of this, we consider the implications for sociolinguistic methodology, being dependent on the notion of semantic equivalence (Weiner and Labov 1983; Lavandera 1996).

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